

Mariner's Church (Bethel Building)
Fore Street, between Moulton and
Market Streets
Portland
Cumberland County

HABS No. ME-135

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, D.C. 20240

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

MARINER'S CHURCH (Bethel Building)

HABS No. ME-135

Location: Fore Street, between Moulton and Market Streets, Portland, Cumberland County, Maine.

Present Owner: C.H. Robinson Co., 165 Commercial Street, Portland, Maine.

Present Use: Occupied by C.H. Robinson Co., used as warehouse for paper products.

Significance: An excellent example of early warehouse construction, of special interest because of its dual function as a church for seamen.

Chain of Title: In 1827, a board of trustees was incorporated as the Portland Marine Society, comprising 16 men and 5 religious denominations, to purchase land and erect the building. In the Panic of 1837, their mortgages were foreclosed, but Asa Clapp began buying titles to the property and owned a major portion of it by September, 1839 and all of it by 1844. In 1848 when he died, the property passed to his sons Charles Q. and A.W.H. Clapp. In 1856, Charles sold his half to his brother for \$12,500. It remained in the Clapp family until the C.H. Robinson Co. bought it from the Clapp estate in 1934.

Date: In 1826, a subscription was started for the Church and \$4000 raised as a beginning. The board of trustees, incorporated Feb. 1827, bought \$18,500 of land between Oct. 1827 and April 1828, when construction began. In September, 1828 the October auction of market stalls was announced. The building was dedicated June 14, 1829.

Architect: Unknown

Building suppliers, etc.: Dr. Daniel Rose, warden of the State Prison at Thomaston, contracted to supply the granite. The trustees charged him with late delivery (mid-October) and overcharging (60¢ per foot when granite for the Bunker Hill Monument cost only 12¢ a foot). The court awarded the trustees \$512.50 for the late delivery which broke the contract, but required them to pay Rose \$441.20 for the stone, as the contract did not specify cost.

Original Plan and Construction:

The building cost \$33,000. Three stories faced on Fore Street and four on the waterfront; before the creation of Commercial street in 1852 from fill, the rear was almost at the head of Commercial and Long Wharves. Part of the bottom floor was market; the rest was shops. On the second and third floors were a nautical book store, clothing store, library, school room, two rooms for the Portland Marine Society, a room for a nautical school, and a chapel, center top, 40 by 65 feet. Rents were \$3,000 a year.

The original facade contained six doorways, reading left to right on the ground floor: window bay, 3 doors, 4 windows, 3 doors, 1 window. The rising sun was painted in the half-round window, and over it, in gold leaf, was the inscription "Mariner's Church, 1828." The interior of the chapel included tall pilasters flanking the central windows and extending up to the bottom of the half-round window, making a pseudo-Palladian complex. The chapel was oriented toward these windows. Its ceiling was low on the sides and rose to a peak in the center.

But the "original plan" concerned the building's purpose far more than its appearance. The week of the dedication the Christian Mirror said, "It is a building reared for the moral and religious instruction of a much neglected but valuable and interesting class of the community". An 1831 article described the Church's intended effect: "The deep, wild waste of waters has now become a field of prayer. Humanity and piety, like twin sisters, stand upon the shore to give the sailor an affectionate farewell as he leaves his native strand---and there they remain to greet him on his return. He now leaves his family, if he have one, under the shadow of the Bethel flag...as for himself, let storm or calm convulse or smooth the bosom of the ocean, his mind turns to the last impressive services of religion in the Bethel church...The erection of this Bethel Church, formed an era in the history of American benevolence towards seamen. It was like the solution of a problem, and hundreds awoke, as from a dream, to act nobly for those who do business upon the great waters."

Alterations:

The pillars of the Palladian window are gone, as are the gold sun and inscription. Windows in the base of the sides were filled in the 1930's. In the 1920's, a fire gutted most of the inside, destroying all interior finishes including the ceiling of the chapel except for traces of supporting ribs.

Views:

A woodcut from the N.W. was published in S. G. Goodrich, A Pictorial Geography of the World, Boston, 1849, p.159, and reproduced in the Portland Sunday Times May 3, 1903. An engraving of the facade elevation, from The Monthly Repository and Library of Entertaining Knowledge, 1831, is in the Church Scrapbook of the Main Historical Society.

Sources:

Mr. Robinson of the C. H. Robinson Co., interview July 1965. Article by Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr. on the Mariner's Church, in the Portland Evening Express August 7, 1965, and notes of Mr. Shettleworth. His sources include deeds in the Cumberland County Registry of Deeds; newspaper articles from 1827 to 1829, catalogued in the Portland Public Library; William Willis, History of Portland 1833, vol. 2; article from the Portland Sunday Times, May 3, 1903; and article from the Monthly Repository and Library of Entertaining Knowledge, p.81-3, in the Maine Historical Society.

Prepared by: Martha Kingsbury
Summer, 1965

Edited for HABS by: Druscilla J. Null
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PART II. ARCHITECTURAL DESCRIPTION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural interest and merit: The Fore Street elevation (north) is a simple classic granite facade with a fine half-round fan window in the pediment.
2. Condition of fabric: Exterior good; the interior, partly damaged by fire, contains fragments and modern construction.

B. Detailed Description of the Exterior:

1. A three story building, granite and brick masonry, gable roof, rectangular plan, sloping site front to back, bounded by Moulton, Fore, Market and Commercial Streets. South elevation partly obscured by adjacent building.
2. Foundations: Granite and brick
3. Wall construction: Fore Street elevation grey granite in dressed regular coursed ashlar, curved at corners. Fore Street sidewalk elevation painted black on first floor. Moulton and Market Street elevations red brick in running bond. Belt courses define floor levels. Northeast corner curved granite, northwest corner curved brick.
4. Structural System: Post and beam, brick and granite bearing wall and truss, iron posts, wood joists and beams.
5. Porch on Moulton Street; wood steps with fragments of iron railing.
6. Chimneys: Two brick chimneys
7. Openings:
 - a. Doorways are defined by granite surrounds and recessed. Two paneled doors per opening, 1 panel, 3 lights each.
 - b. Windows:
 1. West and east facades
 - a. 6/6 double hung, no shutters
 - b. Glass block windows in basement story granite heads and sills.
 2. North front
 - a. First floor: Variety of large pane, sash
 - b. Second floor: Casements, 2 sashes per opening, 2 lights over window in arched opening.
 - c. Third floor: DH windows 2/2, fan light in pediment, 45 lights in radial pattern of fifteen segments.

8. Roof: Gable roof with asphalt shingle covering. Granite cornice at Fore Street elevation. Downspouts are recessed. Brick cornice at Moulton and Market Street elevations, metal gutters and downspouts.

C. Detailed Description of the Interior:

1. Floor plans and wall and ceiling finishes:
 - a. Basement (ground floor): Single space partly divided by 12" brick wall.
 - b. First floor: Several spaces partitioned by plaster wall on sawed lath, carsiding, fiber board, iron columns, fragments of sheet metal ceiling and wall covering.
 - c. Second floor: Two stairways from street to third floor. Several spaces for storage. Sheet metal ceilings, carsiding walls and ceiling, plaster walls and ceiling.
 - d. Third story: Large central hall, stairs to balcony at south end. Fragments indicate suspended plaster vault ceiling, covered half-round window opposite Fore Street. Mortise and tenon jousts in truss. Sliding doors and miscellaneous trim.
2. Stairways: Wood. Turned newels, round rails, round baluster.
3. Flooring: Miscellaneous wood boards and strips, concrete at basement floor.
4. Doorways and doors: None of importance.
5. Decorative features and trim: None of importance.
6. Notable hardware: None
7. Lighting: None
8. Heating: None

D. Site and Surrounding:

Faces north on Fore Street, with Moulton and Market Streets each side; adjacent building (warehouse) to the south. This is part of the building group owned and occupied by the Robinson Paper Company.

Prepared by: F. Blair Reeves, A.I.A.
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